

# REVIEW ESSAY

## A War To Be Won

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The book club called *A War To Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* the definitive history of World War II.<sup>1</sup> When I received my copy, I turned immediately to the history of the Belgian Bulge. In November 1944 I was a second lieutenant of combat engineers, fresh out of Officer Candidate School. My destination was the war in the Pacific. The Bulge changed that. Instead of going to the Pacific, I was sent to Belgium as a casualty replacement.

At war's end, I was in Worms, Germany, where I stayed in the occupation army until February 1947. So in any book about World War II, I always look first for the story of the Bulge and the epic tale of the engineers blowing up the three Meuse River bridges right in the face of German General Jochen Peiper's SS armored column. Peiper's cry of fury and frustration: "Those damned engineers!" is for me the high point of that heroic saga.

Authors Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett omit Peiper's cry of rage, but they do describe his subsequent trial at Nuremberg for the Malmedy Massacre. They relate the trial much as does Charles B. MacDonald in *A Time for Trumpets*.<sup>2</sup> However, they claim that Peiper's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment when "Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin used his influence . . . because of Peiper's 'anticommunism.'"<sup>3</sup>

In fact, US Senator Robert Taft knew what many in Europe had heard—some German witnesses had been beaten until they would have confessed to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Taft caused an uproar about the hypocrisy of the entire business. Soviet judges were on the bench. McCarthy, a freshman senator who had little influence, followed Taft's lead.<sup>4</sup> Murray and Millett follow MacDonald's account, but

the "anticommunism" seems to be their own invention.

I wondered if Murray and Millett had made up any other good McCarthy stories, so I looked in the index. McCarthy was not mentioned. Neither were Bletchley Park, Drumbeat, Paukenschlag, Enigma, Ultra, Magic or Purple, Katyn Forest or Kasserine Pass, posit or proximity fuze, radar, Henry Kaiser or liberty ships, submarine or U-boat, OSS, Oran or Venona, all of which appear somewhere in the text. In fact, the index is only 14 pages long. MacDonald's book has 25 index pages for a work that covers little more than a month of the war.

The book contains a fair number of maps, but they are in black and white. Dark gray arrows show US or Allied movements. Black arrows indicate enemy movements. Since the maps contain many arrows, the lack of contrast is a real nuisance. Also, I found a dozen misspellings and one dubious translation.

Many sections are good, and various section summaries are insightful. But, Murray and Millett have an annoying habit of inserting inappropriate wisecracks and snap judgments, usually with no supporting evidence for their opinions. In particular, US General Douglas MacArthur can do nothing right: "If noble words could kill, MacArthur would rank with Genghis Khan as a slayer of millions."<sup>5</sup> "MacArthur's paranoia [and] lust for [publicity] were well known."<sup>6</sup> "After five months of battle in France, MacArthur saw no field service again and his premature generalship . . . cut him off from the rigorous professional military education of the interwar years. He was a general-impresario . . . most given to geopolitical lecturing, not generalship."<sup>7</sup> Many readers know that George C. Marshall had never fought in battle,

and that US General Dwight D. Eisenhower saw his first dead US soldier while being flown over the Kasserine Pass battlefield. But Murray and Millett never let go. MacArthur "was always hostile to those who were his equal."<sup>8</sup> Even the final Japanese surrender on the battleship *Missouri* was arranged by "general-dramatist MacArthur" and was "MacArthur's bit of *kabuki*."<sup>9</sup>

The authors cite nothing to support these grotesque opinions. In fact, documentation is not a strongpoint of their book. I counted 34 cheap shots, exactly half of which were anti-MacArthur.

They also make nasty cracks about Chinese General Chiang Kai-shek, US Major General Lewis H. Brereton, the entire Swiss nation, Czechoslovakian President Eduard Benes, US General Leslie Groves, German Panzerleader Heinz Guderian, US General Mark Clark and Pope Pius XII.<sup>10</sup> This scholarly smart-aleck behavior seems to be a current academic fad. I find it sophomoric and annoying.

To be fair, the authors give US General George S. Patton the credit he has always deserved but not always received. On the German side, General Erwin Rommel and Field Marshal Eric von Manstein get fair and, I believe, accurate treatment. The authors even have a good, albeit brief, criticism of the US Army's infamous replacement system devised by Marshall in World War I, which caused casualty rates four to five times as high as those sustained by troops who had trained together.<sup>11</sup>

In other places, the authors too readily accept common wisdom. For example, Russian KGB defector Viktor Suvorov advanced the interesting thesis that Russian Dictator Joseph Stalin was actively preparing to attack German Dictator Adolf Hitler when the Germans launched

Operation *Barbarossa* in June 1941.<sup>12</sup> Suvorov provides considerable evidence for this thesis, which makes more sense than the usual view that Stalin—of all people—was a gullible simpleton outfoxed by the crafty Hitler.

Murray and Millett seem unaware of Suvorov's thesis. Even though they observe that by "stationing the Red Army's best units in the border areas, [Stalin] ensured their destruction at the campaign's outset [and] the worst disasters . . . occurred in the center. There the Red Army had deployed its troops well forward in Soviet-occupied Poland."<sup>13</sup> It seems not to have crossed the authors' minds that there might have been a reason why the Red Army was deployed so far forward when Hitler struck.

When describing the arrival on the Moscow front of fresh Russian troops from Eastern Siberia during the winter of 1941-1942, Murray and Millett do not mention that this reinforcement was only possible because Richard Sorge, a Soviet spy in Tokyo, had been able to assure Stalin that Japan would not attack in the Russian East. So, one of the most important intelligence victories of the war goes unnoticed in this "definitive history."

Murray and Millett are especially weak in their appreciation of the effects of intelligence operations. Surveying some peripheral fallout of the war, they mention Yugoslavia, where "Tito's communist partisans made short work of their main opponents, the Serbian Chetniks of Draza Mihailovic."<sup>14</sup>

What Murray and Millett do not say, and perhaps did not know, is that Mihailovic did well as long as he was supported by the British. But Yugoslav affairs were handled by the British Special Operation Executive Office in Cairo, where James Klugmann, a Communist of British double agent Kim Philby's stripe, doctored the reports to make British Prime Minister Winston Churchill think that Tito was fighting the Germans while Mihailovic was fighting only Tito.<sup>15</sup> Disgusted, Churchill switched British support to Tito. A communist firing squad ended Mihailovic's life, and Yugoslavia slid

behind the Iron Curtain.

The authors' description of how the Russian winter affected the *Wehrmacht* is excellent. In late summer 1945, I was in charge of two battalions of German prisoners—one *Wehrmacht* and one SS—who were assembling prefabricated quarters at Bad Aibling under US engineer supervision. The *Wehrmacht* battalion, of barely company strength, had no officers left and was commanded by a sergeant who had been in the first drive on Moscow. Because I spoke some German, we chatted, mostly about his plans to move to the United States as soon as he could, but also about the Moscow Campaign. Murray and Millett's account tallies perfectly with the sergeant's description of that cold winter.

Why any army would attack Russia with no preparation for the Russian winter is hard to understand, but that is exactly what the Germans did. Suvorov claimed that Stalin's intelligence chief had carefully monitored German army purchases of winter supplies. Because there was no increase, he assured Stalin that German troop movements on the frontier could not mean an attack. After the attack, Stalin forgave the intelligence chief, who had fully expected to be shot.

Suvorov's explanation for the apparent insanity of the German attack without proper preparation is that Hitler realized Stalin's intentions too late to accumulate supplies. He struck the Soviets in what was, in essence, a spoiling attack. Although I cannot accept the entirety of Suvorov's thesis, it makes enough sense to merit some discussion in any serious World War II analysis.<sup>16</sup>

A definitive history should also mention poison gas which, like Sherlock Holmes's dog that did not bark, had been expected to play a major role in the war and did not. We know from the disaster in Bari Harbor when the liberty ship John Harvey was sunk by bombing that all the major combatants expected and tried to prepare for gas warfare, keeping stocks of gas near the front. When V-bombs began falling on London, Churchill wanted to retaliate with gas and was only talked out of it with difficulty.

In a war in which every other atrocity, from mass firebombing of cities to herding people into concentration camps to nuclear-weapons use, occurred, the non-use of gas is anomalous. I have heard that some US officers wanted to use gas to neutralize Japanese defenses on Iwo Jima, but US President Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to authorize it.

Murray and Millett also slight the ongoing dispute over the Pearl Harbor attack. To be fair, Robert B. Stinnett's *Day of Deceit* probably did not appear until after their book was in press, but there was enough in print to suggest that the common version of the deceitful Japanese and the innocently trusting Roosevelt might be a bit too simple.<sup>17</sup>

Murray and Millett accept the usual picture of Japanese Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's task force moving in radio silence, even though several stations and the *SS Lurline* picked up and reported extensive Japanese naval chatter in the North Pacific. With the new evidence Stinnett presents, anyone who still maintains that Roosevelt was surprised by the Japanese "sneak" attack is misinformed.

Murray and Millett also claim that Spanish Dictator Francisco Franco "deliberately drew out the [Spanish Civil War] to kill the maximum number of his loyalist opponents."<sup>18</sup> Later they assert that "Franco . . . was making clear his eagerness to join the Axis as quickly as possible."<sup>19</sup> Both statements are wrong. In fact, Hitler and Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini tried desperately to get Franco to join the Axis. Franco would flirt, but he never would join.

Some of their allegations are outright crazy. They assert: "some planners knew that the Germans had begun to develop nuclear warheads."<sup>20</sup> As anyone with even a passing acquaintance with World War II knows, the German atomic program, directed by Werner Heisenberg, did not even get close to developing a fissionable device. The authors also grandly affirm that "anti-Semitism and anti-Communism fused in the twentieth century," which is why, I suppose, Stalin killed and imprisoned so many Jews.<sup>21</sup>

The authors' most grandiose

howler is their assertion that the "German victory [in May 1940] came perilously close to destroying Western civilization."<sup>22</sup> Apparently North America did not count as part of Western civilization.

Other sweeping allegations are possibly true but inherently unprovable. For example, they say, "Rommel proved himself the premier battlefield commander of the war."<sup>23</sup> Rommel was certainly excellent in the North African desert, but how good would he have been in New Guinea? We have no way of knowing, and it does not matter anyway. Such grand assertions are worthless, as any competent military history professor should know.

The authors assert that British General Bernard Montgomery "proved to be one of the great field commanders of World War II."<sup>24</sup> Montgomery had an advantage over Rommel of nearly 4:1 in troop strength, 3:1 in tanks and almost 4:1 in aircraft.<sup>25</sup> With odds like that, it would require genius to lose.

Murray and Millett share the civilian delusion that a competent commander is intolerant of subordinates' failure. Thus Marshall is "almost always an extraordinarily good judge of talent."<sup>26</sup> Later they write approvingly of the "ruthlessness with which Eisenhower sacked senior officers who failed."<sup>27</sup> Both Marshall and Eisenhower advocated the zero-defects doctrine, but when compared with the Third Army where, for all his bluster, Patton was conservative in relieving officers for mistakes, reasonable tolerance for unavoidable blunders in war correlates with better performance.<sup>28</sup>

The book is subject to a common weakness of many World War II books—the morality play of good guys versus bad guys. One would have hoped to see this attitude eliminated by now. But, to Murray and Millett, German generals were all "convinced" Nazis, as though they had choices, but Russian generals are never described as "convinced" communists. As a result of this stereotyping, the authors miss useful insights. For example, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, whom I consider the best all-around commander the Germans had, was a typical Prus-

sian Junker of the old school. He was loyal to his country but thoroughly contemptuous of the upstart Nazis. When he received a monetary award for distinguished service, he characterized it as *saugeld*, an almost obscene German expression of disgust.

After the Allied breakout in Normandy, agitated German General Wilhelm Keitel asked Rundstedt, "What shall we do?" Rundstedt replied, "What shall we do? Make peace, you fools! What else can you do?"<sup>29</sup> Yet, Murray and Millett can only say of Rundstedt: "Despite his postwar claims of having been disinterested in politics, he would loyally serve Hitler and the Nazi regime to the bitter end."<sup>30</sup>

The worst aspect of *A War to Be Won* is the clumsy handling of the war's moral aspect. The description of Nazi atrocities is straightforward; there are several illustrations of concentration camp inmates and civilians who were executed; and the authors describe, with little or no comment, corresponding Soviet atrocities.<sup>31</sup> But, they do not mention the Soviet use of prisoners as the first wave in attacks through mine fields or as barrier troops. Stalin's infamous rape order also receives no comment. Japanese atrocities are only adequately described and illustrated.

I could find no reference to the US Strategic Bombing Survey conducted immediately after the war.<sup>32</sup> The US Army Air Force had high hopes that the survey would justify the bombing program. Instead, it showed that German industrial production increased right up to the end of the war. The only effective bombings were those of railroads and oil fields.

The massive raids on cities, deliberately kindling firestorms like the Dresden bombing, with the accompanying slaughter of civilians, proved to have been unjustifiable atrocities that had no demonstrable effect on German military capabilities. Murray and Millett refer to "German industry, which ringed major cities."<sup>33</sup> Blasting German cities to rubble from the center out merely reflected the fact that, facing intense flak and fighter opposition, "precision" bombers had trouble hitting any target

smaller than an entire city.<sup>34</sup>

In the book section titled "The Air War in Retrospect," the authors balance the effect of forcing Germany to build antiaircraft guns and fighter planes instead of field pieces and bombers to find some sort of hypothetical justification.<sup>35</sup> They also persuade themselves that the combined bomber offensive was not elegant or humane, but it was effective. That formulation is unacceptable. One can easily imagine Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels declaring that producing munitions at Auschwitz was not elegant or humane, but effective.

In the epilogue, the authors desperately argue against "moral equivalence," claiming that the Germans and Japanese "came close to destroying the two great centers of world civilization and to imposing in their stead imperial regimes founded on racial superiority, slavery and genocide."<sup>36</sup> This evades the real difficulty. No one is arguing that the war itself was wrong or that the wrong side won. The point is that some US-perpetrated atrocities did not contribute significantly to winning the war. They were just atrocities. Hindsight allows us to see the mistakes and ponder the important lessons.

Peiper was condemned to death for allowing his troops to kill 71 to 86 US prisoners of war in the Malmedy Massacre. To be sure, his mission was one that made looking after prisoners difficult. Of course, that is no excuse. Still, when I looked across Nuremberg during the time of the War Crimes Tribunal, as far as I could see was nothing but shattered rubble. Over it still lingered the characteristic smell of all bombed cities—a faint mixture of smoke and the sickly-sweet smell of corpses rotting under the ruins. How many of Peiper's men had parents, siblings or sweethearts buried in the ruins? That reflection does not alter my belief that Peiper should have been shot for murdering prisoners, but I do not feel self-righteous about the US role, either.

In tragedies the hero sins, either unavoidably or through ignorance. World War II was a tragedy, which is why I so dislike Murray and

